

discuss how your engagement with technology changes from context to context. For example, do you use online technology more in one context than another? In what contexts/situations might you prefer “old media” like phone, written letter, or even face-to-face communication?

2. Print and broadcast media have been struggling to survive in a digitized world. Do some research on one of these media to see what some of the current issues are. Why are they struggling? What do you think they could do to remain profitable and relevant?
3. As more media products become digital, issues of ownership and copyright get more attention. Identify some pros and cons of limits on sharing digital media and stricter copyright laws.

15.2 Functions and Theories of Mass Communication

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify key functions of the mass media.
2. Explain how the media functions as a gatekeeper.
3. Discuss theories of mass communication, including hypodermic needle theory, media effects, and cultivation theory.

How does mass communication function differently than interpersonal communication? Do we have relationships with media like we have relationships with people? To answer these questions, we can look at some of the characteristics and functions of mass communication. One key characteristic of mass communication is its ability to overcome the physical limitations present in face-to-face communication. The human voice can only travel so far, and buildings and objects limit the amount of people we can communicate with at any time. While one person can engage in public speaking and reach one hundred

thousand or so people in one of the world's largest stadiums, it would be impossible for one person to reach millions without technology.

Another key characteristic of mass communication in relation to other forms of communication is its lack of sensory richness. In short, mass communication draws on fewer sensory channels than face-to-face communication. While smell, taste, and touch can add context to a conversation over a romantic dinner, our interaction with mass media messages rely almost exclusively on sight and sound. Because of this lack of immediacy, mass media messages are also typically more impersonal than face-to-face messages. Actually being in the audience while a musician is performing is different from watching or listening at home. Last, mass media messages involve less interactivity and more delayed feedback than other messages. The majority of messages sent through mass media channels are one way. We don't have a way to influence an episode of *The Walking Dead* as we watch it. We could send messages to the show's producers and hope our feedback is received, or we could yell at the television, but neither is likely to influence the people responsible for sending the message. Although there are some features of communication that are lost when it becomes electronically mediated, mass communication also serves many functions that we have come to depend on and expect.

Functions of Mass Media

The mass media serves several general and many specific functions. In general, the mass media serves information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, and diversion functions:

- **Information function.** We have a need for information to satisfy curiosity, reduce uncertainty, and better understand how we fit into the world. The amount and availability of information is now overwhelming

compared to forty years ago when a few television networks, local radio stations, and newspapers competed to keep us informed. The media saturation has led to increased competition to provide information, which creates the potential for news media outlets, for example, to report information prematurely, inaccurately, or partially.

- **Interpretation function.** Media outlets interpret messages in more or less explicit and ethical ways. Newspaper editorials have long been explicit interpretations of current events, and now cable television and radio personalities offer social, cultural, and political commentary that is full of subjective interpretations. Although some of them operate in ethical gray areas because they use formats that make them seem like traditional news programs, most are open about their motives.
- **Instructive function.** Some media outlets exist to cultivate knowledge by teaching instead of just relaying information. Major news networks like CNN and BBC primarily serve the information function, while cable news networks like Fox News and MSNBC serve a mixture of informational and interpretation functions. The in-depth coverage on National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service, and the more dramatized but still educational content of the History Channel, the National Geographic Channel, and the Discovery Channel, serve more instructive functions.
- **Bonding function.** Media outlets can bring people closer together, which serves the bonding function. For example, people who share common values and interests can gather on online forums, and masses of people can be brought together while watching coverage of a tragic event like 9/11 or a deadly tornado outbreak.
- **Diversion function.** We all use the media to escape our day-to-day lives, to distract us from our upcoming exam, or to help us relax. When we are being distracted, amused, or relaxed, the media is performing the diversion function.

The Media as Gatekeeper

In addition to the functions discussed previously, media outlets also serve a gatekeeping function, which means they affect or control the information that is transmitted to their audiences. This function has been analyzed and discussed by mass communication scholars for decades. Overall, the mass media serves four gatekeeping functions: relaying, limiting, expanding, and reinterpreting. John R. Bittner, *Mass Communication*, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 11. In terms of relaying, mass media requires some third party to get a message from one human to the next. Whereas interpersonal communication only requires some channel or sensory route, mass media messages need to “hitch a ride” on an additional channel to be received. For example, a *Sports Illustrated* cover story that you read at SI.com went through several human “gates,” including a writer, editor, publisher, photographer, and webmaster, as well as one media “gate”—the Internet. We also require more than sensory ability to receive mass media messages. While hearing and/or sight are typically all that’s needed to understand what someone standing in front of you is saying, you’ll need a computer, smartphone, or tablet to pick up that SI.com cover story. In summary, relaying refers to the gatekeeping function of transmitting a message, which usually requires technology and equipment that the media outlet controls and has access to, but we do not. Although we relay messages in other forms of communication such as interpersonal and small group, we are primarily receivers when it comes to mass communication, which makes us depend on the gatekeeper to relay the message.

In terms of the gatekeeping function of limiting, media outlets decide whether or not to pass something along to the media channel so it can be relayed. Because most commercial media space is so limited and expensive, almost every message we receive is edited, which is inherently limiting. A limited message doesn’t necessarily mean the message is bad or manipulated, as editing is a necessity. But

a range of forces including time constraints, advertiser pressure, censorship, or personal bias, among others, can influence editing choices. Limiting based on bias or self-interest isn't necessarily bad as long as those who relay the message don't claim to be objective. In fact, many people choose to engage with media messages that have been limited to match their own personal views or preferences. This kind of limiting also allows us to have more control over the media messages we receive. For example, niche websites and cable channels allow us to narrow in on already-limited content, so we don't have to sift through everything on our own.

Gatekeepers also function to expand messages. For example, a blogger may take a story from a more traditional news source and fact check it or do additional research, interview additional sources, and post it on his or her blog. In this case, expanding helps us get more information than we would otherwise so we can be better informed. On the other hand, a gatekeeper who expands a message by falsifying evidence or making up details either to appear more credible or to mislead others is being unethical.

Last, gatekeepers function to reinterpret mass media messages. Reinterpretation is useful when gatekeepers translate a message from something too complex or foreign for us to understand into something meaningful. In the lead-up to the Supreme Court's June 2012 ruling on President Obama's health-care-overhaul bill, the media came under scrutiny for not doing a better job of informing the public about the core content and implications of the legislation that had been passed. Given that policy language is difficult for many to understand and that legislation contains many details that may not be important to average people, a concise and lay reinterpretation of the content by the gatekeepers (the media outlets) would have helped the public better understand the bill. Of course, when media outlets reinterpret content to the point that it is untruthful or misleading, they are not ethically fulfilling the gatekeeping function of reinterpretation.

In each of these gatekeeping functions, the media can fulfill or fail to fulfill its role as the “fourth estate” of government—or government “watchdog.” You can read more about this role in the “Getting Critical” box.

“Getting Critical”

The Media as “Watchdog”

While countries like China, North Korea, Syria, and Burma have media systems that are nearly if not totally controlled by the state regime, the media in the United States and many other countries is viewed as the “watchdog” for the government. This watchdog role is intended to keep governments from taking too much power from the people and overstepping their bounds. Central to this role is the notion that the press works independently of the government. The “freedom of the press” as guaranteed by our First-Amendment rights allows the media to act as the eyes and ears of the people. The media is supposed to report information to the public so they can make informed decisions. The media also engages in investigative reporting, which can uncover dangers or corruption that the media can then expose so that the public can demand change.

Of course, this ideal is not always met in practice. Some people have critiqued the media’s ability to fulfill this role, referring to it instead as a lapdog or attack dog. In terms of the lapdog role, the media can become too “cozy” with a politician or other public figure, which might lead it to uncritically report or passively relay information without questioning it. Recent stories about reporters being asked to clear quotes and even whole stories with officials before they can be used in a story drew sharp criticism from other journalists and the public, and some media outlets put an end to that practice. In terms of the attack-dog role, the twenty-four-hour news cycle and constant reporting on public figures has created the kind of atmosphere where reporters may be waiting to pounce on a mistake or

error in order to get the scoop and be able to produce a tantalizing story. This has also been called being on “scandal patrol” or “gaffe patrol.” Media scholars have critiqued this practice, saying that too much adversarial or negative reporting leads the public to think poorly of public officials and be more dissatisfied with government. Additionally, they claim that attack-dog reporting makes it more difficult for public officials to do their jobs. Shelia S. Coronel, “The Media as Watchdog,” Harvard-World Bank Workshop, May 19, 2008, accessed September 19, 2012, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Conference/Conference%20papers/Coronel%20Watchdog.pdf>.

1. In what ways do you think the media should function in a democratic society?
2. Do you think the media in the United States acts more as a watchdog, lapdog, or attack dog? Give specific examples to support your answer.
3. In an age of twenty-four-hour news and instant reporting, do you think politicians’ jobs are made easier or more difficult? Do you think reporters’ jobs are made easier or more difficult? Support your answers.

Theories of Mass Communication

Theories of mass communication have changed dramatically since the early 1900s, largely as a result of quickly changing technology and more sophisticated academic theories and research methods. A quick overview of the state of the media in the early 1900s and in the early 2000s provides some context for how views of the media changed. In the early 1900s, views of mass communication were formed based on people’s observation of the popularity of media and assumptions that something that grew that quickly and was adopted so readily must be good. Many people were optimistic about the mass media’s potential to be a business opportunity, an educator, a watchdog, and an entertainer. For

example, businesses and advertisers saw media as a good way to make money, and the educator class saw the media as a way to inform citizens who could then be more active in a democratic society. As World War I and the Depression came around, many saw the media as a way to unite the country in times of hardship. Early scholarship on mass media focused on proving these views through observational and anecdotal evidence rather than scientific inquiry.

Fast forward one hundred years and newspapers are downsizing, consolidating to survive, or closing all together; radio is struggling to stay alive in the digital age; and magazine circulation is decreasing and becoming increasingly more focused on microaudiences. The information function of the news has been criticized and called “infotainment,” and rather than bringing people together, the media has been cited as causing polarization and a decline in civility. Charles C. Self, Edward L. Gaylord, and Thelma Gaylord, “The Evolution of Mass Communication Theory in the 20th Century,” *The Romanian Review of Journalism and Communication* 6, no. 3 (2009): 29. The extremes at each end of the twentieth century clearly show that the optimistic view of the media changed dramatically. An overview of some of the key theories can help us better understand this change.

Hypodermic Needle and Beyond

In the 1920s, early theories of mass communication were objective, and social-scientific reactions to the largely anecdotal theories that emerged soon after mass media quickly expanded. These scholars believed that media messages had strong effects that were knowable and predictable. Because of this, they theorized that controlling the signs and symbols used in media messages could control how they were received and convey a specific meaning. Charles C. Self, Edward L. Gaylord, and Thelma Gaylord, “The Evolution of Mass Communication Theory in the 20th

Century,” *The Romanian Review of Journalism and Communication* 6, no. 3 (2009): 34.

Extending Aristotle’s antiquated linear model of communication that included a speaker, message, and hearer, these early theories claimed that communication moved, or transmitted, an idea from the mind of the speaker through a message and channel to the mind of the listener. To test the theories, researchers wanted to find out how different messages influenced or changed the behavior of the receiver. This led to the development of numerous theories related to media effects. Media businesses were invested in this early strand of research, because data that proved that messages directly affect viewers could be used to persuade businesses to send their messages through the media channel in order to directly influence potential customers.

This early approach to studying media effects was called the hypodermic needle approach or bullet theory and suggested that a sender constructed a message with a particular meaning that was “injected” or “shot” into individuals within the mass audience. This theory is the basis for the transmission model of communication that we discussed in Chapter 1 “Introduction to Communication Studies”. It was assumed that the effects were common to each individual and that the meaning wasn’t altered as it was transferred. Through experiments and surveys, researchers hoped to map the patterns within the human brain so they could connect certain stimuli to certain behaviors. For example, researchers might try to prove that a message announcing that a product is on sale at a reduced price will lead people to buy a product they may not otherwise want or need. As more research was conducted, scholars began to find flaws within this thinking. New theories emerged that didn’t claim such a direct connection between the intent of a message and any single reaction on the part of receivers. Instead, these new theories claimed that meaning could be partially transferred, that patterns may become less predictable as people are exposed to a particular

stimulus more often, and that interference at any point in the transmission could change the reaction.

These newer theories incorporated more contextual factors into the view of communication, acknowledging that both sender and receiver interpret messages based on their previous experience. Scholars realized that additional variables such as psychological characteristics and social environment had to be included in the study of mass communication. This approach connects to the interaction model of communication. In order to account for perspective and experience, mass media researchers connected to recently developed theories in perception that emerged from psychology. The concept of the gatekeeper emerged, since, for the first time, the sender of the message (the person or people behind the media) was the focus of research and not just the receiver. The concepts of perceptual bias and filtering also became important, as they explained why some people interpreted or ignored messages while others did not. Theories of primacy and recency, which we discussed in Chapter 9 "Preparing a Speech", emerged to account for the variation in interpretation based on the order in which a message is received. Last, researchers explored how perceptions of source credibility affect message interpretation and how media messages may affect viewers' self-esteem. By the 1960s, many researchers in mass communication concluded that the research in the previous twenty years had been naïve and flawed, and they significantly challenged the theory of powerful media effects, putting much more emphasis on individual agency, context, and environment. Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 457.

The next major turn in mass communication theory occurred only a few years after many scholars had concluded that media had no or only minimal effects. Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 459. In the 1970s, theories once again

positioned media effects as powerful and influential based on additional influences from social psychology. From sociology, mass media researchers began to study the powerful socializing role that the media plays but also acknowledged that audience members take active roles in interpreting media messages. During this time, researchers explored how audience members' schemata and personalities (concepts we discussed in Chapter 2 "Communication and Perception") affect message interpretation. Researchers also focused more on long-term effects and how media messages create opinion climates, structures of belief, and cultural patterns.

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, a view of media effects as negotiated emerged, which accounts for the sometimes strong and sometimes weak influences of the media. This view sees the media as being most influential in constructing meanings through multiple platforms and representations. For example, the media constructs meanings for people regarding the role of technology in our lives by including certain kinds of technology in television show plots, publishing magazines like *Wired*, broadcasting news about Microsoft's latest product, airing advertisements for digital cameras, producing science fiction movies, and so on. Although these messages are diverse and no one person is exposed to all the same messages, the messages are still constructed in some predictable and patterned ways that create a shared social reality. Whether or not the media intends to do this or whether or not we acknowledge that how we think about technology or any other social construct is formed through our exposure to these messages is not especially relevant. Many mass communication scholars now seek to describe, understand, or critique media practices rather than prove or disprove a specific media effect.

Additionally, mass communication scholars are interested in studying how we, as audience members, still have agency in how these constructions affect our reality, in that we may reject, renegotiate, or reinterpret a given message based on our

own experiences. For example, a technology geek and a person living “off the grid” have very different lives and very different views of technology, but because of their exposure to various forms of media that have similar patterns of messages regarding technology, they still have some shared reality and could talk in similar ways about computers, smartphones, and HD television. Given the shift of focus to negotiated meaning and context, this view of mass communication is more in keeping with the transactional model of communication.

Media Effects

Media effects are the intended or unintended consequences of what the mass media does. Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 465. Many of the key theories in mass communication rest on the assumption that the media has effects on audience members. The degree and type of effect varies depending on the theory. In general, we underestimate the effect that the media has on us, as we tend to think that media messages affect others more than us. This is actually so common that there is a concept for it! The third-party effect is the phenomenon just described of people thinking they are more immune to media influence than others. If this were true, though, would advertisers and public relations professionals spend billions of dollars a year carefully crafting messages aimed at influencing viewers?

There are certain media effects that are fairly obvious and most of us would agree are common (even for ourselves). For example, we change our clothes and our plans because we watch the forecast on the Weather Channel, look up information about a band and sample their music after we see them perform on a television show, or stop eating melons after we hear about a salmonella outbreak. Other effects are more difficult to study and more difficult for people to accept

because they are long term and/or more personal. For example, media may influence our personal sense of style, views on sex, perceptions of other races, or values just as our own free will, parents, or friends do. It is difficult, however, to determine in any specific case how much influence the media has on a belief or behavior in proportion to other factors that influence us. Media messages may also affect viewers in ways not intended by the creators of the message. Two media effects that are often discussed are reciprocal and boomerang effects. Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 466.

The reciprocal effect points to the interactive relationship between the media and the subject being covered. When a person or event gets media attention, it influences the way the person acts or the way the event functions. Media coverage often increases self-consciousness, which affects our actions. It's similar to the way that we change behavior when we know certain people are around and may be watching us. For example, the Occupy Movement that began on Wall Street in New York City gained some attention from alternative media and people using micromedia platforms like independent bloggers. Once the movement started getting mainstream press attention, the coverage affected the movement. As news of the Occupy movement in New York spread, people in other cities and towns across the country started to form their own protest groups. In this case, media attention caused a movement to spread that may have otherwise remained localized.

The boomerang effect refers to media-induced change that is counter to the desired change. In the world of twenty-four-hour news and constant streams of user-generated material, the effects of gaffes, blunders, or plain old poor decisions are much more difficult to control or contain. Before a group or person can clarify or provide context for what was said, a story could go viral and a media narrative constructed that is impossible to backtrack and very difficult to

even control. A recent example of such an effect occurred at the University of Virginia when the governing body of the university forced President Teresa A. Sullivan to resign. The board was not happy with the president's approach to dealing with the changing financial and technological pressures facing the school and thought ousting her may make room for a president who was more supportive of a corporate model of university governance. Richard Pérez-Peña, "Ousted Head of University Is Reinstated in Virginia," *New York Times*, June 26, 2012, accessed November 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/27/education/university-of-virginia-reinstates-ousted-president.html?pagewanted=all>. When the story picked up local and then national media coverage, students, faculty, and alumni came together to support Sullivan, and a week later she was reinstated. Instead of the intended effect of changing the direction and priorities for the university, the board's actions increased support for the president, which will also likely add support to her plans for dealing with the issues.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory is a media effects theory created by George Gerbner that states that media exposure, specifically to television, shapes our social reality by giving us a distorted view on the amount of violence and risk in the world. The theory also states that viewers identify with certain values and identities that are presented as mainstream on television even though they do not actually share those values or identities in their real lives. Em Griffin, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 352–53. Drawing on cultivation as it is practiced in farming, Gerbner turned this notion into a powerful metaphor to explain how the media, and television in particular, shapes our social realities. Just as a farmer plants seeds that he or she then cultivates over time to produce a crop, the media plants seeds in our minds and then cultivates them until they grow into our shared social reality.

Over decades of exploring cultivation theory, Gerbner made several well-supported conclusions that are summarized as follows:

- Prime-time television shows and weekend morning children's programming have been found to contain consistently high amounts of violence over the past thirty years.
- Older people, children, African Americans, and Latino/as are more likely to be shown as victims of violence than are their young-adult, middle-aged, and/or white counterparts. This disparity is more meaningful when we realize that these groups are also underrepresented (relative to their percentage in the general population) on these shows while their vulnerability to violence is overstated.
- The effects of television viewing on our worldview build up over years, but in general, people who are more heavy viewers perceive the world as more dangerous than do light viewers. Gerbner coined the phrase "mean world syndrome," which refers to the distorted view of the world as more violent and people as more dangerous than they actually are.
 - Heavy viewers predict that their odds of being a victim of violence within the next week are 1 in 10, while light viewers predicted 1 in 100. Real crime statistics give a more reliable estimate of 1 in 10,000.
 - Heavy viewers fear walking alone on the street more than do light viewers, believing that criminal activity is actually ten times more prevalent than it actually is.
 - Heavy viewers believe that more people are involved in law enforcement and that officers draw and use their weapons much more than is actually the case.
 - Heavy viewers are generally more suspicious of others and question their motives more than do light viewers (the basis of the mean world syndrome).

- Given that most people on television are portrayed as politically moderate and middle class, heavy viewers are more likely to assume those labels even though heavy users tend to be more working class or poor and more politically conservative than moderate. In short, they begin to view themselves as similar to those they watch on television and consider themselves a part of the mainstream of society even though they are not.

“Getting Competent”

Applying Media Theories

Although most do not get mass public attention, there are many media criticism and analysis organizations that devote much time and resources to observing, studying, and/or commenting on how the media acts in practice, which often involves an implicit evaluation of media theories we have discussed so far, in particular media effects theories. Media outlets and the people who send messages through media outlets (i.e., politicians, spokespeople, and advertisers) are concerned about the effects and effectiveness of their messaging. As we already learned, the pervasive view of media effects today is that media messages do affect people, but that people have some agency in terms of how much or little they identify with or reinterpret a message.

To understand media effects, media criticism organizations do research on audience attitudes and also call on media commentators to give their opinions, which may be more academic and informed or more personal and partisan. In either case, taking some time to engage with these media criticism organizations can allow you to see how they apply mass communication theories and give you more information so you can be a more critical and informed consumer of media. You can find a list of many media criticism organizations at the following link: <http://www.world-newspapers.com/media.html>. Some of these

organizations have a particular political ideology or social/cultural cause that they serve, so be cautious when choosing a source for media criticism to make sure you know what you're getting. There are also more objective and balanced sources of media criticism. Two of my personal favorites that I engage with every week are CNN's show *Reliable Sources* (<http://reliablesources.blogs.cnn.com>) and the public radio show *On the Media* (<http://www.onthemedial.org>). *Reliable Sources* even has an implicit reference to reciprocal effects in its show description, stating, "The press is a part of every story it covers." "About This Show," *CNN Reliable Sources*, accessed September 20, 2012, <http://reliablesources.blogs.cnn.com>. *On the Media* ran a story that implicitly connects to cultivation theory, as it critiques some of the media's coverage of violence and audiences' seeming desensitization to it. Bernie Bernstein, "The Story of the Times Gory Empire State Shooting Photo," *On the Media*, August 24, 2012, accessed September 20, 2012, <http://www.onthemedial.org/blogs/on-the-media/2012/aug/24/story-times-gory-empire-state-shooting-photo1>.

1. Of the "functions of mass media" discussed earlier in the chapter, which functions do media criticism organizations like the ones mentioned here serve? Specifically, give examples of how these organizations fulfill the gatekeeping functions and how they monitor the gatekeeping done by other media sources.
2. Since media criticism organizations like *Reliable Sources* and *On the Media* are also media sources (one a television show and one a radio show), how might they be contributing to reciprocal effects?
3. Using the links provided, find a substantial article, study, or report that analyzes some media practice such as the covering of a specific event. Apply some aspect of media effects from the chapter to the story. How might media effects theory help us understand the criticism being raised?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The mass media serves information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, and diversion functions.
- As a gatekeeper, the media functions to relay, limit, expand, and reinterpret information.
- The hypodermic needle theory of mass communication suggests that a sender constructs a message with a particular meaning that is “injected” into individuals within a mass audience.
- Theories of media effects explore the intended or unintended effects of what the media does. Theories have claimed strong effects, meaning that media messages can directly and intentionally influence audience members. They have also claimed weak effects, meaning that media messages have no little power over viewers. More recently, theories have claimed negotiated effects, meaning that media messages do affect viewers but that viewers also have some agency to identify with, reject, or reinterpret a message.
- Cultivation theory explores a particular kind of media effect claiming that media exposure, specifically to television, shapes our social reality by giving us a distorted view on the amount of violence and risk in the world.

EXERCISES

1. Which function of mass media (information, interpretation, instructive, bonding, or diversion) do you think is most important for you and why? Which is most important for society and why?
2. What ethical issues are created by the gatekeeping function of the media? What strategies or suggestions do you have for bypassing this function of the media to ensure that you get access to the information you want/need?
3. Getting integrated: Discuss media messages that have influenced or would influence you in a professional, academic, personal, and civic context.